

A Darkening Bavarian Sky

By Jenny Butler

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Another cold and cheerless winter night that I must avert my eyes from the poor wretches and their fearful, darting eyes. I pass them by. Moonlight shines on their bereft, ragged forms as they scuttle into the darkness with no small hands to hold. It has been seven weeks since the children disappeared.

The woodcutter refuses to enter the forest so has no logs to cut, while the shopkeeper boarded up his shop and stays inside with his precious little one. Carpentry has ceased in the workshop because the carpenter's wife is too frightened to be alone with her baby. Small jobs and woodturning can be done indoors, but both parents hold in deep suspicion anyone calling to collect an item – Did that person, whether neighbour or friend, intend to steal the baby, snatch him from their arms? Who was behind this horror? Why was it happening?

Each day, at twilight, the townspeople gather together. They come with twigs and brushwood in hand, for all fear entering the forest in search of larger kindling. Bonfires are lit in the hope the children, presumed lost in the forest, will follow the glow and emerge.

At the bonfire tonight, I see the shopkeeper has come with provisions for the assembly. He grasps his daughter's arm so tightly that she winces in pain. Moving his big hand up her thin little arm as he reaches over with a parcel of food, I notice the marks. His strong grip leaves fingertip-shaped bruises in her pale skin. It wasn't as if any of the remaining youngsters would dare move an inch from their parents, but such was the terror that they might evaporate somehow with only a momentary break in this physical contact.

Gaunt faces are hungering for the shopkeeper's goods but distracted by the shadowy forest in their peripheral vision. Even though the fire is lit in the same spot each time, it seems like the trees are somehow *nearer*, as if the forest itself is encroaching on us. Activity would begin with one of them telling stories of their children, rejoicing in memories of how sweet the girls were, playing with their dolls, or even how naughty the boys could be! This reminiscence produces a feeling of propinquity; they might just come tramping out of those trees any moment! Singing lightens their nightly outpouring of pain, but even this becomes morose for the new songs have verses about their lost sons and daughters. As more days passed, the repetitive bonfire lighting became more a ritual than a beacon of light to lost children.

My heart leapt from my chest the night they brought forth the head of their Wicked Witch: I recognised her! I looked upon her kindly eyes, frozen in horror, as they forced the neck down onto the spikes of the pitchfork. As a boy, on one of my many jaunts into the wood to hunt rabbits with my slingshot, I often passed this woman's house. One day, on a high having killed three, I saw her peeking from her doorway, a red scarf tied around her long black lustrous hair. She beckoned and I approached the

wooden porch. Her eyes were large and dark brown and she had smooth olive skin – I thought her incredibly beautiful! Her ears were completely decked with jewels! She smiled, shyly, saying something I didn't understand and pointed at the rabbits. It was then I realised she couldn't speak German. So exotic was her appearance that I couldn't help staring at her. She glanced again at the rabbits and, taking out my knife, I hunkered down and skinned one for her.

She went into the cabin and gestured for me to follow. I entered and placed the rabbit on the table. Never could I have anticipated the exchange for this one rabbit! She went into her pantry and returned with as much candy as she could carry: delicious-looking assorted cakes of all shapes and sizes, baumkuchen, star-shaped cinnamon biscuits, sugared fried dough, fruit-breads. It being obvious I couldn't possibly carry these by hand as well as the rabbits, she fetched a piece of linen and bundled them all in, tying it in a knot. I got a long stick from out front and when I returned, she bent to help me secure the parcel to the stick. As she brushed against me, my nostrils filled with the unfamiliar piquant scent of her skin, a curious perfume like blackberries and orange-zest blended together. In my adolescent dreams, I would catch a waft of this fragrance and wake filled with longing and wonder.

It shocked me now to look into those old, though still beautiful, eyes wherein a strange light remained. Her wizened olive-hued face was framed by long grey hair. All those years ago, my parents warily received my boyish story – the rabbit-catch exaggerated to six. I remember their fretful glances across the kitchen table when I mentioned the cabin in the woods. Unbeknownst to me, the townsfolk believed she was a hex-caster, that she could turn you into an animal if she wanted! I was tainted

by my close contact with her, the fact I had been *in her house*, and indignantly my mother dragged me to the church where the priest did a special blessing for me. The linen-wrap from my cake-bundle was snatched from me. My mother screamed when my father moved to place it in the hearth – it had to be burnt outdoors. Some of the townspeople’s theories of her origin and other wild imaginings excited me, some appalled me. I often wondered at her strange speech, where she really had come from but despite my curiosity, I never returned to the cabin.

Oh they believe they have captured their Witch, exterminated the foul enchantress. In the weeks after, I held my tongue as hysterical mothers concocted vile images of the deeds of this disgusting Witch, the one to blame, the focus for their hatred. I know better.